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# Reception, Gratitude and Obligation: Lessing and the Classical Tradition

John T. Hamilton

## I

In the prefatory remarks to his *Rettungen des Horaz* (“Redemptions of Horace,” 1754), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing elucidates his approach to classical antiquity by means of an elaborate analogy:

I myself can think of no occupation more pleasant than scrutinizing the names of famous men, investigating their right to eternity, wiping away undeserved stains, eliminating the false patches that cover their weak spots—in brief, doing everything in a moral sense that he, who is entrusted with supervising a picture gallery, performs physically.<sup>1</sup>

It should come as no surprise that, in composing an essay on Horace, the 23-year-old scholar would modify and deploy one of the poet’s most influential analogies: *ut pictura poesis*. On the basis of this time-honored maxim, salvaging a poet’s name comes to be likened to restoring an old painting; supervising a literary tradition is comparable to overseeing a picture gallery. What is less expected is Lessing’s particular usage: rather than revert to the *Ars poetica* dictum as a way of engaging in the sister-arts debate, rather than explicating the phrase’s import or assessing

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<sup>1</sup> “Ich selbst kann mir keine angenehmere Beschäftigung machen, als die Namen berühmter Männer zu mustern, ihr Recht auf die Ewigkeit zu untersuchen, unverdiente Flecken ihnen abzuwischen, die falschen Verkleisterungen ihrer Schwächen aufzulösen, kurz alles das im moralischen Verstande zu tun, was derjenige, dem die Aufsicht über einen Bildersaal anvertrauet ist, physisch verrichtet.” *Rettungen des Horaz* (1754), in G.E. Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 12 vols., W. Barner et al, ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987 – 98), 3: 159. Subsequent citations from Lessing’s works are from this edition, marked *WB* with volume and page numbers.

its truth value, he *applies* it to the needs of the present, appropriating and adopting it in order to characterize his own critical practice. Whereas others might invoke the Horatian *ut pictura poesis* to uphold the fundamental similarity of the arts, Lessing exploits it to distinguish his analytical tactics. With rhetorical but no less self-directed legerdemain he transmutes the *pictura* into curatorship and *poesis* into criticism. A prescription for a poet becomes a description for a reader. Without delving too far into the validity and implications of this recalibration, it is sufficient to note that Lessing perpetuates the tradition of *ut pictura poesis* by interrupting it, by redirecting its course so as to make it articulate his specific method in the present. Horace's famous analogy is of continued relevance thanks to this individual gesture of discontinuity and *détournement*.<sup>2</sup>

Even for those only slightly familiar with Lessing's work, this early appearance of the correlation between painting and poetry cannot fail to recall the later *Laokoon* essay (1766), where *ut pictura poesis* serves as the argument's principal point of departure and object of critique. From our own privileged position of posterity, we could relate the caution expressed in the *Laokoon* back to the statement from the *Rettungen* made twelve years prior. The *Laokoon* preface stresses that the conventionally accepted affinity between verbal and visual art is indeed an analogy, which is to say, it can declare similarity only on the basis of essential differences. Once more, continuity presupposes discontinuity. What motivates Lessing's *Laokoon* is nothing other than the alleged fact that the constitutive dissimilarities have not been regarded with sufficient consideration. To illustrate this claim, Lessing conjures three types of recipients: the "amateur" (*Liebhaber*), the "philosopher" (*Philosoph*) and the "critic" or "judge of art" (*Kunstrichter*). The amateur and the philosopher attend simply to what both sides of the

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<sup>2</sup> On the tension between continuity and discontinuity in the *Rettungen des Horaz*, see my article, "Thunder from a Clear Sky: On Lessing's Redemption of Horace," *Modern Language Quarterly* 62 (2001), 203 – 218.

comparison share: painting and poetry both represent (i.e., they are both mimetic); they both create illusions; they both share a common source in nature. However, the astute *Kunstrichter* is further capable of judging what distinguishes one art-form from the other. In implicitly adopting this critical role, Lessing draws out a series of differences, not yet between the art-forms but rather between their three stereotypical recipients: the amateur discovers affinity by way of a “subtle feeling,” while the philosopher arrives at the same by ascribing “general rules to a number of things”; finally, the critic, who alone is positioned in this framework to notice the dissimilarities between painting and poetry, does so once more by *applying* his observations, by *turning them toward—an-wenden*—the specific matter at hand: “The principal value of [the critic’s] observations depends on their correct application [*Anwendung*] to the individual case.”<sup>3</sup>

David Wellbery has concisely outlined the theoretical premises behind this tripartite analysis: “The standpoint of the critic, his field of activity, is language—not mute, immediate experience of the individual instance, nor conceptualization that subsumes all individuals beneath universals, but that difficult middle region where experience first becomes ordered, categorized, articulated.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the critic’s position illustrates yet another Horatian ideal, the “golden mean” drawn from Aristotelian ethics which here negotiates the extremes of particular feeling and abstract reason. Just as the *Rettungen* preface accomplished a literary *détournement*, turning Horace’s poetic pronouncement (*ut pictura poesis*) into a criterion for criticism, the *Laokoon* preface adapts an Aristotelian-Horatian ethical ideal (*aurea mediocritas*) to address aesthetic problems. Whereas Wellbery tacitly invokes the *aurea mediocritas* to outline

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<sup>3</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, E. A. McCormick, trans. (1962; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 3. [“bei den Bemerkungen des Kunstrichters beruhet das Meiste in der Richtigkeit der Anwendung auf den einzeln Fall”; *Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, WB 5/2: 13].

<sup>4</sup> David Wellbery, *Lessing’s Laocoon: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 101.

its import for eighteenth-century semiotic and aesthetic theories, my consideration of Lessing's critical approach maintains the emphasis on balance as belonging to a realm of inquiry that Wellbery does not address directly, namely the realm of ethics or morality. Beyond the doubtlessly crucial aspects of semiotics and aesthetics, there is also a moral-ethical dimension which, I would argue, instigates Lessing's career-long engagement with and interpretation of the classical tradition.

The issue of morality is explicitly broached in the *Rettungen* passage cited above: Like an expert conservateur assigned with the task of *physically* restoring a painting to its original state, the philologist *morally* rehabilitates an author's legacy. As the *Laokoon* discussion has alerted us, the analogy reveals as much as it conceals, marking both a continuum and a fundamental discontinuity between its two terms. The morality of the literary word seems to be equated with the materiality of the image, but only by being distinguished from it. Lessing would expend much curatorial energy in rescuing the dignity of classical authors; and did so generally, as described in this remark, through methods of removal—by “wiping away stains,” by “eliminating false patches.” As the English cognate *ridding* suggests, his *Rettung* project strives to conserve and give new life to received texts by cleansing them of tradition and thereby freeing writers from the abuse that compromised their claims to eternity. Yet, it is important to note, Lessing is no servile adulator of the classics—the “false patches” to be removed cover “weak spots” (*Schwächen*) that are undeniably there. Accordingly, the poet's moral reputation can only be saved by the moral interventions of the present-day reader.

As our modern critical term *reception* implies, works of art and literature should be understood as gifts. To open a book or behold a sculpture is to receive something that has been given over, something that has been delivered or entrusted to us—in Latin, a *traditum*. In this

sense every reader is an heir, every viewer a grantee. Thus conceived, a tradition inscribes the reader, viewer or spectator into a system of exchange, which may or may not be respected. Having received, one arguably incurs a debt and is henceforth summoned to offer something in return. With remarkable consistency, throughout his engagement with the classical tradition, Lessing acts as a moral agent by acknowledging this debt, by demonstrating the kind of gratitude that does not fetishize or selfishly hoard the gifts received but rather obligingly provides fresh gifts to be passed along to others. Thus Lessing encourages critical engagement among his own contemporary readership within the public sphere.<sup>5</sup> Gratitude breeds gratitude, which is shown by freely replying to rather than complying with the classical heritage entrusted to us, the things passed along, the *tradita*.

## II

Lessing's "occupation" (*Beschäftigung*) with Horace is also a "service"; he places himself in the position to "procure" (*beschaffen*) assured posterity for the poet. Lessing regards the task of redeeming Horace as a responsibility owed to one of those "great minds" so admired that he would not tolerate "the slightest slander."<sup>6</sup> The moral imperative that motivates the *Rettungen* is therefore especially pronounced, insofar as it directly addresses the question of Horace's own behavior or disposition, whether it was virtuous or vicious. What Lessing has in mind are the

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<sup>5</sup> See Dorothea von Mücke, "Authority, Authorship and Audience: Enlightenment Models for a Critical Public," *Representations* 111 (2010), 60 – 87.

<sup>6</sup> "[Ich] sage, daß auch ich einige große Geister so verehere, daß mit meinem Willen nicht die allergeringste Verleumdung auf ihnen haften soll." (*WB* 3: 159)

accusations, circulated in the biographical tradition, that the Roman poet was a brilliant artist but a man of doubtful principles:

Yes, it is said [*man spricht*] that Horace sang the tenderest and most charming songs, but no one was more a slave to lust than he; he praised bravery to the point of rapture but was himself the most cowardly of fugitives; he had the most sublime concepts of the divine but was himself its sleepest worshipper.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the allegations of prurience, pusillanimity, and impiety which derive from various ancient and early modern sources long befouled the image of the poet. Yet, Lessing's duty is not restricted to correcting this unjust tradition. Rather, it aims to save tradition itself; for the malicious rumors hounding the poet invariably imperil his reception. Although Horace's poetic genius is undisputed, although his *Ars poetica* remains an indispensable source for classical criteria, representing him as a man infected with vice may well furnish pedants and prigs with arguments dissuading the youth from reading this poet of poets. The slanderous biographical tradition therefore threatens to block the classical tradition itself: on moral grounds, books could be censored, galleries shut down. To defuse this risk, Lessing cites his own moral grounds: he will "do everything in a moral sense" (*alles im moralischen Verstande zu tun*) to keep tradition in force and alive.

The *Rettungen* will not strive to salvage Horace from obsolescence but rather from the distortions produced by modern misreadings, deficient interpretations or noxious gossip. The

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<sup>7</sup> "Ja, spricht man, er sang die zärtlichsten und artigsten Lieder, niemand aber war wollüstiger als er; er lobte die Tapferkeit bis zum Entzücken, und war selbst der feigherzigste Flüchtling; er hatte die erhabensten Begriffe von der Gottheit, aber er selbst, war ihr schläfrigster Verehrer." (*WB* 3: 160)

project is not simple, insofar as we are asked to question the authority of received tradition on the basis of Lessing's own and novel authority.<sup>8</sup> Is his role as supervisor a bid for control—to work as self-designated culture gatekeeper and surveillance agent—or is his critique a sincere attempt to save tradition from itself? Can his moral orientation prevent his authoritative interventions from becoming fixed, in turn, into unassailable dogma? In either case, Lessing's response to charges against the Roman poet is organized around the significance of hearsay, around the value of the “man spricht.” As Lessing indicates, the indictment of Horace's laciviousness reaches back to an ancient biographical account, annexed to the Bodleian manuscript of the poet's *carmina* and long attributed to Suetonius: *Ad res venereas intemperantior traditur. Nam speculato cubiculo scorta dicitur habuisse disposita, ut quocunque respexisset, ibi ei imago coitus referretur* – “It is related [*traditur*] that [Horace] was rather immoderate in sexual matters. For it is said [*dicitur*] that he enjoyed his whore in a mirrored bedroom, so that wherever he might look, he would get an image of intercourse.”<sup>9</sup> To dispute this description, Lessing simply emphasizes the unreliability of historical transmission: “*traditur, dicitur*: Two nice words for which many an honest man can thank the loss of his good name.”<sup>10</sup> The notions of tradition and concomitant gratitude are no sooner broached than seriously undercut by mordant irony.

This irony, however, should not be construed as a complete dismissal. Instead, it should remind us that the idea of tradition and the free-handed repayment it demands may assume many distinct forms. The tradition that Horace can “thank” for his ruined reputation is nothing more than a repertoire of conventional opinion—what Hans Robert Jauss characterizes as a “grown

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<sup>8</sup> On Lessing and the issue of arrogated authority, see Wilfried Barner, “Autorität und Anmaßung: Über Lessings polemische Strategien, vornehmlich im antiquarischen Streit,” in *Streitkultur: Strategien des Überzeugens im Werk Lessings*, W. Mauser and G. Sasse, ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993), 15 – 37.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in *WB* 3: 162. It is presumed that the *Vita Horati* is from the chapter *De poetis* in Suetonius' *De viris illustribus*. For a comprehensive discussion of this text, see Eduard Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 1 – 43.

<sup>10</sup> “*traditur, dicitur*. Zwei schöne Wörter, welchen schon mancher ehrlicher Mann den Verlust seines guten Namens zu danken hat!” (*WB* 3: 162)



tradition”—which renders recipients passive and easily persuaded. This kind of tradition is still an inheritance, but one that is perceived more as a burden, as a heavy weight imposed by an authoritative source which calls for mere acquiescence.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Jauss identifies this debt as a “monological monument” to be rejected insofar as it demands an inauthentic response or facile obedience.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the historical-cultural donations that constitute a “chosen tradition” may be recognized in a dialogical fashion. Within a chosen tradition acceptance entails a commitment to answer, that is, through engaged interpretation, individual judgment, or creative recasting. In this case, reception history is specifically a history of taking and giving, of concerned attention and meaningful reciprocation.

These two basic—and admittedly quite schematic—options turn on two distinct but related senses of the term *tradition* itself. Well before signifying an instruction or a saying handed down from former times, a *traditio* denoted any possession delivered from one party to another. The earliest extant usage generally linked the verb *tradere* to monetary or commercial issues, for example in Plautus’ *Trinummus*: *argentum didi / thensauri causa, ut salvom amico traderem* (“I gave the silver / for the sake of a treasure, that I might *deliver* it safe to a friend,” (*Trin.* 1.2.142f.); or in the *Asinaria*, when a desperate Argyrippus pleads with Libanus for twenty minae: *mihi trade istuc* (“Hand it over to me!” *As.* 3.3.99). It is only much later, from the Imperial period on, that *traditio* assumed the sense of an authoritative, dogmatic pronouncement that demanded compliance. In this later usage what the recipient was expected to give back was, if not silent conformity, a dutiful service to discover, explicate and adhere to an original, universal, eternal truth.

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<sup>11</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, “Racines und Goethes ‘Iphigenie’” in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, R. Warning, ed. (Munich: Fink, 1975), 353 – 400; see esp. 389. For further discussion, see Irmgard Wagner, “Hans Robert Jauss and Classicity,” *Modern Language Notes* 99 (1984), 1173 – 1184.

<sup>12</sup> Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, T. Bahti, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 21. [Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), 144 – 207; 171].

These two distinct usages of *tradition*—the monological-authoritarian sense and the dialogical-economic one—were persistently operative in Lessing’s work. From one perspective, in good Lutheran fashion, he often conjures the “odious name of tradition” to unmask these established legacies as paralyzing encumbrances, as formidable mechanisms of silencing.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, however, for example in the *Laokoon*, the term *tradition* loses its apostolic, papist baggage and is employed instead more positively as a line of thinking that continues to alter through history.<sup>14</sup> Here, Lessing takes seriously the idea of a cultural tradition understood as a living endowment, one that still demands respect but nonetheless encourages active repayment in the form of critical scrutiny, informed interpretation, and pragmatic *application*. In this regard, Jauss’ portrayal corresponds well with Lessing’s ideal: “A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to every reader in every period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence.”<sup>15</sup> Across Lessing’s dealings with classical antiquity, the earlier, Plautine meaning of *tradere* remains in force, replete with its monetary, though gratuitous, implications. Characteristically, in the central scene of *Nathan der Weise*, when the Sultan Saladin asks for financial support, he first receives a complementary parable.

### III

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Lessing’s *Sogenannte Briefe an verschiedene Gottesgelehrten* (1779), *WB* 10: 190 – 92.

<sup>14</sup> For some representative instances from the *Laokoon* essay, see *WB* 5/2: 50 and 66.

<sup>15</sup> Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” 21.

Lessing recognized early on the merits of applying his reading. Already as a student cloistered in St. Afra, on his own initiative, he supplemented the school's conventional curriculum in Latin authors by turning to the characters studies of Theophrastus and the comedies of Plautus and Terence. Later in life, in the preface to his collected *Rettungen* (1754), he would reminisce on these days in Meißen: "Theophrastus, Plautus and Terence were my world, which I studied in full comfort within the narrow setting of a cloistered school – How I wish to have these years back; the only ones in which I lived happily."<sup>16</sup> The explicit contrast between a nearly monastic existence (*klostermäßig*) and the wide "world" beyond these confines underscores the sense of freedom that the young man always linked to the moral realm. The rigorous grammatical training of the school's regular course of study, with its emphasis on philological method and set *disputationes*, had quickly revealed its limits. In a letter to his mother he confessed, "I learned to realize, books would teach me well but would never make me a man."<sup>17</sup> Yet, his dissatisfaction with the traditional lesson plan did not neglect the possibility of an alternative tradition, one available through other books, in which he could discover an escape from the dust of *Gelehrsamkeit*, an outlet opening onto applicability, toward recognizing the tendencies, motivations and desires of those who populated the present, including himself. The letter continues:

For a while I laid the serious books off to the side, to look around at that which is far more pleasant and perhaps just as useful. The comedies first came into my hands. It may appear unbelievable, but they have done me a very great service. I learned from them to

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<sup>16</sup> "Theophrast, Plautus und Terenz waren meine Welt, die ich in dem engen Bezirke einer klostermäßigen Schule, mit aller Bequemlichkeit studierte —Wie gerne wünschte ich mir diese Jahre zurück; die einzigen, in welchen ich glücklich gelebt habe." *WB* 3:154.

<sup>17</sup> "Ich lernte einsehen, die Bücher würden mich wohl gelehrt, aber nimmermehr zu einen Menschen machen" Letter to Justina Salome Lessing (20 Jan. 1749), *WB* 11/1: 15.

distinguish good and constrained, rough and natural conduct. From them I got to know true and false virtues, and to flee vices because of their ridiculousness just as much as their shamefulness. [...] But I might have almost forgotten the noblest use that these plays have afforded me. I got to know myself, and since that time I certainly haven't laughed or sneered at anyone more than myself.<sup>18</sup>

As Lessing elaborates in his *Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*, published in 1750 upon abandoning his university studies, it is precisely this capacity for inciting self-knowledge that defines ancient comedy's service to the modern German stage.<sup>19</sup>

The moral, educative role of comedy was, of course, a commonplace of eighteenth-century theory. It had been emphasized, for example, by Shaftesbury who proposed that "ridicule," as opposed to regulative reason, should serve to test the validity of any idea or place any moral decision on trial: "Truth, 'tis supposed, may bear all lights; and one of those principle lights, or natural mediums, by which things are to be viewed, in order to a thorough recognition, is ridicule itself, or that manner of proof by which we discern whatever is liable to just raillery in any subject."<sup>20</sup> The more purely rationalist tradition as well confirmed the capacity of comedy to work as a corrective. For example, Johann Christoph Gottsched, following French neo-classical theory, underscored the satirical display of vice as an implicit means of extolling virtue. In the

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<sup>18</sup> "Ich legte die ernsthaften Bücher eine zeitlang auf die Seite, um mich in denjenigen umzusehn die weit angenehmer, und vielleicht eben so nützlich sind. Die Comoedien kamen mir zur erst in die Hand. Es mag unglaublich vorkommen, wem es will, mir haben sie sehr große Dienste getan. Ich lernte daraus eine artige und gezwungne, eine grobe und natürliche Aufführung unterscheiden. Ich lernte wahre und falsche Tugenden daraus kennen, und die Laster eben so sehr wegen ihres lächerlichen als wegen ihrer Schändlichkeit fliehen. [...] Doch bald hätte ich den vornehmsten Nutzen, den die Lustspiele bei mir gehabt haben, vergessen. Ich lernte mich selbst kennen, und seit der Zeit habe ich gewiß über niemanden mehr gelacht und gespottet als über mich selbst." *WB* 11/1: 16.

<sup>19</sup> See esp. Lessing *Vorrede* to the *Beyträge*, *WB* 1: 726 – 33.

<sup>20</sup> Shaftesbury, *Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*; cited in Edward Brewer, "Lessing and 'The Corrective Virtue in Comedy,'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 26 (1927), 1 – 23, 2.

*Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst* (1730), Gottsched regards the combination of the vicious and the ridiculous as the sole criterion for defining comedy: “One should therefore note well that neither the vicious nor the ridiculous belongs in comedy on its own; rather, both belong together.”<sup>21</sup>

Lessing acknowledged the central role of exposing immoral behavior as laughable, yet he also saw the merit in positively representing virtue by an appeal to the spectator’s emotions, something that Gottsched rejected as compromising the classic identity of the comedic genre. He justified his defense of *comédie larmoyante* by championing the plays of Plautus which Gottsched tended to subordinate to the more classically correct work of Terence. In his critical biography of Plautus, published in the *Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*, Lessing cites the wording that, according to Aulus Gellius, adorned the playwright’s tombstone.

Postquam est mortem aptus Plautus, Comoedia luget:

Scena est deserta. Hinc ludus risusque jocusque

Et numeri innumeri simul omnes collacrimarunt.<sup>22</sup>

After Plautus died, Comedy mourns:

The stage is deserted. Here play and laughter and joke

And innumerable rhythms at once all cry together.

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<sup>21</sup> “Es ist also wohl zu merken, daß weder das Lasterhafte, noch das Lächerliche für sich allein, in die Komödie gehört; sondern beydes zusammen.” Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Versuch einer Critischen Dichtkunst* (1730; 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1751), 643. For a useful summary of Gottsched’s assessment and its relation to the development of German comedy, see Volker Riedel, *Lessing und die römische Literatur* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1976), 32 – 34.

<sup>22</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 1:24; cited in *WB* 3: 745.

Plautus' combination of farce and pathos may offend classical taste, but its applicability to Lessing's own cultural context, its moral efficacy, secures the comic poet's value. Thus, Lessing names Plautus' *Captivi* "the finest comedy ever staged":

I call the finest comedy not that which is most probable and adhering to the rules, not that which has the most ingenious thoughts, the most agreeable ideas, the most delightful jokes, the most artful entanglements, and the most natural denouements, but rather I call the finest comedy that which, in addition to possessing in large part the beauties mentioned, comes closest to achieving its purpose. But what is comedy's purpose? To form and improve the morals of the audience.<sup>23</sup>

This emphasis on moral application reflects a major shift, first discernible in the 1740s, whereby academic philology complemented its traditional practice of textual criticism, grammatical clarification, and lexical commentary with a newfound interest in interpretation. While Lessing was still a student in Leipzig, philology began to shed its subservient role as the "handmaiden" of theology and jurisprudence, and instead grappled in its own way with problems of meaning.<sup>24</sup> Recalling the *Rettungen* passage cited at the head of this essay, we could say that philology no longer focused exclusively on the *physical* restoration of a text but rather worked towards the *moral* production of sense. Rather than establish a stable image, Lessing the philologist strove to put the text to present use, which is not to say that aspirations toward verity were entirely abandoned. As Robert Leventhal comments, "Certainly Lessing was concerned

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<sup>23</sup> "Ich nenne das schönste Lustspiel nicht dasjenige, welches am wahrscheinlichsten und regelmäßigsten ist, nicht das, welches die sinnreichsten Gedanken, die artigsten Einfälle, die angenehmsten Scherze, die künstlichsten Verwicklungen, und die natürlichsten Auflösungen hat: sondern das schönste Lustspiel nenne ich dasjenige, welches seiner Absicht am nächsten kömmt, zumal wenn es die angeführten Schönheiten größtenteils auch besitzt. Was ist aber die Absicht des Lustspiels? Die Sitten der Zuschauer zu bilden und zu bessern." *WB* 1: 876 – 77.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. V. Riedel, *Lessing und die römische Literatur*, 24.

with the ‘correctness’ and the ‘truth’ of interpretation, but this derived in the first instance not from an abstract knowledge or simply from the *explication* itself, but from the actual pragmatic application of such an interpretation.”<sup>25</sup>

In stressing the obligation to provide an active response pertinent to the present, the idea of reception now veered toward the spheres of ethics and morality. Lessing’s interventions in the classical tradition consistently demonstrate this commitment, which further accounts for the polemical thrust of his critical writings. His readiness to enter into direct conflict with his contemporaries, his desire to correct and refine interpretation, to free it from what he would call “allegorical” foreclosure—all indicate a profound awareness of a literary critic’s moral obligation.

Thus, in addition to redemption of Horace, Lessing published a “pocket manual” (*Vademecum*) designed to assist unfortunate readers through the heap of errors that maimed Samuel Gotthold Lange’s fresh translation of Horace’s *Odes*. Lessing’s ruthless approach, gleefully undertaken against the insufferably arrogant Pastor Lange, would continue to flourish in the series of reviews of the latest literature (*Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, 1759 – 1765), where Lessing found many opportunities to denounce, correct and, when justified, praise recent German translations of ancient and modern works. Here, the moral duty is organized temporally, manifesting itself as a service to past authors, present readership, and the future republic of letters. The task is not only to resuscitate classical writers for present-day exchange, but also to ensure their ability to communicate in the time to come. Lessing does not refrain from justifying his mission in frightfully hyperbolic terms: “For the harm that they [critics and

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation: Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany 1750 – 1800* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 74. On Lessing’s contribution to eighteenth-century hermeneutic theory, see Dieter Kimpel, “Lessings Hermeneutik: Voraussetzungsprobleme seiner Kritik im europäisch aufklärerischen Kontext” in *Nation und Gelehrtenrepublik: Lessing im europäischen Zusammenhang*, W. Barner and A.M. Reh, ed. (Munich: Text + Kritik, 1984), 218 – 31.

translators] cause is indescribable. – If in a great, miraculous global catastrophe, all books, except those written in German, suddenly perished, what pitiful figures would the Virgils and Horaces, the Shaftesburys and Bolingbrokes make in posterity!”<sup>26</sup> The apocalyptic rhetoric reveals that Lessing, as self-appointed chief of the translation police, is concerned as much with a burgeoning sense of German literary identity as he is with preserving cultural legacies from the past and abroad. That he selects Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke to illustrate his point only confirms the moral substance of his efforts.

#### IV

Upon publishing the *Laokoon* at Eastertime 1766, Lessing eagerly waited to see how his work would be received by the authorities. Above all, he expected to hear from Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose views on ancient art initiated his penetrating critique.<sup>27</sup> What he did not expect was a letter from Christian Adolf Klotz, professor of philosophy and oratory at Halle, editor-in-chief of two major literary journals, and aspiring Latin poet. Just weeks after the book’s appearance—an event that Goethe would one day describe as a “lightning-bolt”<sup>28</sup>—Klotz penned an excessively flattering and rather saccharine letter to the author to express his undying

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<sup>26</sup> “[D]enn der Schade, den sie stiften, ist unbeschreiblich. — Wenn durch eine große, wunderbare Weltveränderung auf einmal alle Bücher, die deutsch geschriebenen ausgenommen, untergingen; welch eine erbärmliche Figur würden die *Virgile* und *Horaze*, die *S Shaftesburys* und *Bolingbroks* bei der Nachwelt machen!” *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, Letter 7 (*WB* 4: 467 – 68)

<sup>27</sup> See *WB* 5/2: 952 – 53.

<sup>28</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit in Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, K.D. Müller, ed. (Frankfurt a.M: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), 14: 345. For further discussion, see my article, “Fulguratores. Inscribing Thunderbolts in Lessing and Hölderlin,” *Poetica* 33 (2001), 445 – 64.



admiration. Apparently reeling from Lessing's *coup de foudre*, Klotz reminded the writer of how they met "at the tenderest age" of three in Bischofswerda and how, through Lessing's publications, he since became a loving, genuinely devoted friend. Regarding this oddly adolescent outpouring of affection, Lessing would later remark: "I received this letter as one that would not have been any more or less expected than a letter from the man on the moon."<sup>29</sup> Justifiably, he treated Klotz's advances with caution, which ultimately angered the Halle professor. When Klotz's quibbling review of the *Laokoon* appeared in the pages of his own *Acta litteraria*, it was clear that the erstwhile moonstruck fan had turned into a spurned Fury.

With feigned politeness and an intolerably pedantic tone, Klotz used the review to point out inaccuracies and cite other ancient sources that would presumably undermine Lessing's argument. To retaliate, Lessing began to publish a series of *Briefe, antiquarischen Inhalts* (1768 – 69), in which he demonstrates that a mere piling up of counter-examples only proves that Klotz and other unreflecting antiquarians have entirely failed to grasp the book's central argument. These hostilities prepared the way for Lessing's book-length essay, *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet* ("How the Ancients represented Death," 1769), which was provoked by yet another complaint by Klotz. In his preface to a German translation of the Comte de Caylus' *Tableaux tirés de l'Iliade, de l'Odyssée d'Homère et de l'Énéide de Virgile*—a work that figured prominently in the *Laokoon*—Klotz once again took issue with Lessing's exposition. In a footnote to the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Laokoon*, Lessing dismissed Caylus's insinuation that Homer regrettably presented the personification of Death as the twin brother of Sleep, without offering any further attributes.<sup>30</sup> In addition to defending Homer's choice, Lessing in passing asserts that

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<sup>29</sup> "Diesen Brief erhielt ich, als mir ein Brief von dem Manne aus dem Monde gerade nicht mehr und nicht weniger erwartet gewesen wäre." The comment is from Letter 25 of the *Briefe, antiquarischen Inhalts* (1768), where Lessing reprints Klotz's letter in full (*WB* 5/2: 559 – 60).

<sup>30</sup> Caylus is referring to *Iliad* 16.681 – 82, cited in *WB* 5/2: 95.

the ancients, unlike modern artists, never depicted Death with the “repulsive” (*widerlichen*) image of a skeleton. As usual, Klotz attempted to debunk Lessing’s claim by amassing a number of antiquities that do in fact bear this dreaded image.

Before Lessing addresses Klotz’s complaint directly, he first discusses the value of conflict for the Enlightenment project. He admits that controversies may be impolite and cause discomfort; nonetheless this squeamishness “seems to want to forget that the Enlightenment has sheer contradiction to thank for so many important points.”<sup>31</sup> To ignore conflict is to be ungrateful—*undankbar*. “Controversy has fueled the spirit of examination, has kept prejudice and prestige [*Ansehen*] in constant agitation; in brief, has hindered cosmetic untruth from establishing itself in the place of truth.”<sup>32</sup>

The *Antiquarische Briefe* had already expressed this preference for intellectual debate. A motto in Greek, printed without any authorial attribution, adorns the title page, alluding to the occasional nature of the contents: Ἀγώνισμα μᾶλλον ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν ἢ κτῆμα ἐς αἰεὶ (“A contention for hearing in the moment rather than a possession for all time”). Well beyond describing the nature of the letters, the epigraph’s form reveals something crucial about Lessing’s method. The phrase is anonymous because it does not derive as such from any extant Greek text; rather it is Lessing’s own manipulation or new *détournement* of a line from Thucydides, who concludes that his *History* may not be immediately popular, that it was composed to be “a possession for all time rather than a contention for hearing in the moment”—κτῆμά τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν (*Hist.* 1.22). Lessing’s ironic inversion of the sentence is not only a clear example of application, which bends Thucydides’

<sup>31</sup> “Es scheint vergessen zu wollen, daß es die Aufklärung so mancher wichtigen Punkte dem bloßen Widerspruche zu danken hat” (*WB* 6: 717).

<sup>32</sup> “Der Streit hat den Geist der Prüfung genähret, hat Vorurteil und Ansehen in einer beständigen Erschütterung erhalten; kurz, hat die geschminkte Unwahrheit verhindert, sich an der Stelle der Wahrheit festzusetzen” (*WB* 6: 717).

terms in order to speak to present circumstances, but also a performative rejection of “possessing” antiquity. For Lessing, gratitude does not allow the endowment of the classical tradition to be parsimoniously stockpiled or ostentatiously displayed like dead trophies to the owner’s vanity. Rather, the gracious recipient keeps the ancient patrimony in open circulation, using it, modifying it, passing it on, so as to keep the tradition alive and relevant: “a contention for hearing in the moment.”

The difference between an eternal possession and a current, momentary contention may serve to distinguish Lessing’s approach to tradition from Klotz’s. In *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet*, Lessing proposes a striking opposition:

An antiquities-monger [*Altertumskrämer*] is one thing, an antiquities-scholar [*Altertumskundige*] another. The former has inherited the fragments, the latter the spirit of antiquity. The former scarcely thinks with his eyes, the latter also sees with his thoughts.<sup>33</sup>

Lessing laments the ubiquity of *Altertumskrämer* who have reduced the study of antiquity to a wretched state, “when the most learned therein is he who most readily and exhaustively knows how to enumerate such meager trivialities.”<sup>34</sup> Thinking with the eye alone—which is “scarcely” (*kaum*) thinking at all—defines the procedures of empty “punditry” (*Gelehrsamkeit*), which unpacks, shelves and inventories material objects like a miser greedily counting the pieces in his collection. In contrast, the one capable of “seeing with his thoughts” deals with the same objects

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<sup>33</sup> “Ein anderes ist der Altertumskrämer, ein anderes der Altertumskundige. Jener hat die Scherben, dieser den Geist des Altertums geerbet. Jener denkt nur kaum mit seinen Augen, dieser sieht auch mit seinen Gedanken” (6: 757).

<sup>34</sup> “wenn der der Gelehrteste darin ist, der solche Armseligkeiten am fertigsten und vollständigsten auf den Fingern herzuzählen weiß!” (*WB* 6: 757)

much differently. Having “inherited the spirit of antiquity,” his images are animated by thinking which renders them transparent rather than opaque. As the *Laokoon* persistently argued, the opposition between physical vision and moral, discursive cognition spells the difference between an imagination bound and unbound: “In poetry a garment is not a garment; it conceals nothing; our imagination sees right through it.”<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, *der Altertumskundige* moves about within the freedom of the moral sphere, where one thought-image can be looked through onto another; as opposed to the *Altertumskrämer* who stumbles over his crammed collection, looking at things that fail to communicate any meaning.

Klotz believed he could discredit Lessing’s claim that the ancients did not represent Death with a skeleton simply by enumerating example upon example of antique depictions of fleshless human remains. Bound to the material opacity of his antitiquities, Klotz’s imagination can not transcend to an evaluation. Lessing elucidates: “I have asserted that the ancient artists did not represent Death as a skeleton, and I assert it still. Yet to say that the ancient artists did not represent Death as a skeleton, does this then mean that they never represented a skeleton at all?”<sup>36</sup> For Lessing, Klotz’s problem is that he relies too much on a straightforward iconological or allegorical cipher; he seems to believe that every image unequivocally refers to a universal, unchanging idea. Lessing instead pulls images away from a universal referent and *reads* them, cognizant of their context and their particular function within each specific instance. To use again the terms laid out in the preface to the *Laokoon*, Klotz stumbles from playing two distinct roles, the role of the “amateur,” who gapes at an item’s immediacy, and the role of the

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<sup>35</sup> *Laocoön*, McCormick, trans., 38. [“Bei dem Dichter ist ein Gewand kein Gewand; es verdeckt nichts; unsere Einbildungskraft sieht überall hindurch.” *WB* 5/2: 58 – 59]. On this point, see Wellbery, *Lessing’s Laocoon*, 168.

<sup>36</sup> “Ich habe behauptet, daß die alten Artisten den Tod nicht als ein Skelett vorgestellt: und ich behaupte es noch. Aber sagen, daß die alten Artisten den Tod nicht als ein Skelett vorgestellt: heißt denn dieses von ihnen sagen, daß sie überhaupt kein Skelett vorgestellt?” (*WB* 6: 721 – 22)

“philosopher,” who hastily aims to subsume the item beneath a fixed concept. Lessing, ever the astute critic, would prefer to negotiate both poles, by applying immediate observations to the individual case.

Here is an engraved gem, and there a marble urn, and over there a metallic image; all are undoubtedly anique, and all represent a skeleton. Very well! Who doesn't know this?

Who can not know this, if he is not lacking fingers and eyes, as soon as he wants to know it? Shouldn't one have in antiquarian works something more than allegorizations? These ancient works of art represent skeletons: yet do these skeletons, then, represent Death? Must a skeleton absolutely represent Death, the personified abstraction of Death, the deity of Death? Why shouldn't a skeleton simply be able to represent a skeleton? Why not even something else?<sup>37</sup>

Before he submits a single piece of historical evidence, Lessing has already defeated Klotz with this logical argument.<sup>38</sup> The crucial point here is that Lessing removes—or *rids*—the borders that constrain purely ocular thinking. His *Rettung* redeems tradition itself, a tradition that he shows to be not a heap of dead objects but living thought that is merely asleep and capable of being roused and heard again. *Altertumskrämer* like Klotz ungratefully kill off the tradition by locking it within the confines of pedantry, while an *Altertumskundiger* like Lessing acknowledges his

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<sup>37</sup>“Hier ist ein geschnittener Stein, und da eine marmorne Urne, und dort ein metallenes Bildchen; alle sind ungezweifelt antik, und alle stellen ein Skelett vor. Wohl! Wer weiß das nicht? Wer kann das nicht wissen, dem gesunde Finger und Augen nicht abgehen, sobald er es wissen will? Sollte man in den antiquarischen Werken nicht etwas mehr, als gebildert haben? Diese antike Kunstwerke stellen Skelette vor: aber stellen denn diese Skelette den Tod vor? Muß denn ein Skelett schlechterdings den Tod, das personifizierte Abstraktum des Todes, die Gottheit des Todes, vorstellen? Warum sollte ein Skelett nicht auch bloß ein Skelett vorstellen können? Warum nicht auch etwas anders?” (*WB* 6: 722)

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Michael Morton, “Lessing's and Herder's *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet*: A Critical Analysis of the Arguments,” *Lessing Yearbook* 35 (2003), 137 – 68; 139.

indebtedness and obligingly liberates tradition, allowing it to breathe and speak with renewed power within the public sphere.

As Lessing points out, the central claim of *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet* rests on the attested Greek practice of euphemism: the ancients' "fondness for substituting less conspicuous words for those words which immediately arouse a disgusting, sad, ghastly idea."<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, Greek euphemism, which depicts Death as Sleep's brother rather than as a skeleton or decayed corpse, reiterates Lessing's own project of reception, already announced in the *Rettungen des Horaz*, which emphatically moves from immediate, physical concerns to mediated, moral ones. In turning away from Baroque-Christian portrayals of corporeal nature, Lessing further avoids identifying himself with his own mortal body, an identification, whose implacable limits would severely jeopardize any sense of a perfectly free, unbounded subjectivity.<sup>40</sup> Yet, as Lessing must acknowledge, a disembodied subject is no subject at all: a free-floating, unencumbered *cogito* is but a philosopher's fantasy, a fantasy that Lessing, as a critic, must renounce. Death, then, certainly remains a problem, but it may also install hope; for death is the prerequisite for revivification, just as sleep is for arousal, just as contradiction has proved to be for enlightenment.

Among the fragments belonging to an earlier project on the life of Sophocles (ca. 1760), Lessing considers the scant testimony from antiquity and laments: "It will cost some effort to clothe this skeleton with flesh and nerves. It will be almost impossible to turn it into a beautiful

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<sup>39</sup>"Zärtlichkeit, diejenigen Worte, welche unmittelbar eine ekle, traurige, gräßliche Idee erwecken, mit minder auffallenden zu verwechseln" (*WB* 6: 764).

<sup>40</sup> See Dorothea von Mücke, "The Powers of Horror and the Magic of Euphemism in Lessing's 'Laokoon' and 'How the Ancients Represented Death,'" in *Body and Text in the Eighteenth Century*, V. Kelly and D. von Mücke, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 163 – 180; esp. 176 – 77. For a similar analysis on the role of euphemism in Lessing's essay, see also Simon Richter, *Laocoon's Body and the Aesthetics of Pain: Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, Moritz, Goethe* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1992), 62 – 85.

form.”<sup>41</sup> Notwithstanding, as always, his hand is poised to do the work, to invest the time, and properly honor the debt—“Die Hand ist angelegt.” If there is but little to observe with one’s eyes, there is much to see with one’s thoughts. And Lessing’s thoughts—*Gedanken*—are perhaps the most fitting expression of his boundless gratitude, his inexhaustible *Dankbarkeit* for what has been received.

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<sup>41</sup> “Es wird Mühe kosten, dieses Gerippe mit Fleisch und Nerven zu bekleiden. Es wird fast unmöglich sein, es zu einer schönen Gestalt zu machen.” (*WB* 5/1: 238)